

Critical Contours of Maithili Studies
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Organized by
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This symposium aims to generate interdisciplinary conversations about the importance of contemporary scholarly study of Maithil society, culture and language. How has the study of Maithili-speaking peoples shaped humanistic inquiries and intellectual discourses locally and globally? From *Alphabetum Brammhanicum* (1771) to George Abraham Grierson (1851–1941) to Radhakrishna Choudhary (1921–1985), how has the study of Maithili cultures been framed by localized discourses about the region, its language(s) and people(s)? In turn, how has the academic study of Mithila outside of the region received, interpreted and framed these narratives? In light of its disciplinary past, can we envision new research agenda and methods for challenging hegemonies within the academy and in the wider society?

Although colonial-era missionaries and Orientalists took a keen interest in Maithili language, art and culture, the study of Maithili has not maintained the same academic focus in modern universities. Nevertheless, a variety of scholars from a range of disciplines have engaged in the study of Maithili and Mithila into the present. The field as it exists today is dominated by upper-caste, male scholars and littérateurs, who have privileged certain forms of historical knowledge production. Their engagement with Hindu philosophies and what they construed as “high-culture” has—in effect—marginalized contributions by Maithil women, lower-caste communities and religious minorities.

Against this backdrop, our symposium brings together an eclectic group of scholars, who reflect critically on the history, politics and future of Maithili Studies. This symposium is—to the best of our knowledge—the first ever attempt in the history of modern universities to evaluate the status, significance and prospects of Maithili Studies. We anticipate the publication of symposium papers as a peer-reviewed volume. Our symposium—both in framing its research agenda and in selecting its participants—remains steadfastly committed to the ethics of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Abstracts

(Arranged Alphabetically according to Surnames)

Coralynn V. Davis. *Collaborative Scholarship and the Politics of Participation in a Project Linking Expressive Arts Social Change in Mithila.*

This presentation explores how power has been navigated in a multi-modal, collaborative, participatory research project in Mithila. This project explores the interfaces among women's evolving expressive arts, shifting gender norms, and cultural preservation in Mithila. It aims to create greater public access to and interest in Mithila art, story, and culture while contributing to local knowledge and capacity-building, strengthening intergenerational

exchanges and continuities among women, and engaging local people in the expression of, reflection upon, and potential transformation of social and cultural values and practices. Ultimately, the project entails the creation of three distinct but integrated digital resources, namely 1) a public digital archive of women's folklore, 2) a participatory documentary film, and 3) a web-based educational resource that draws on the prior two and is designed for use in classrooms and community educational settings for the exploration of the emancipatory potential in critical study of narrative traditions.

I examine the conception of the project, as well as aspects of its execution on the ground and in the aftermath, reflecting on the development of collaborative and participatory relationships, with a focus on how these relationships have both challenged and reinforced power relations on a range of scales. Here adapt a typology of participation developed by Indian economist Bina Agarwal (2001) to examine the quality of relationships among three "core" team members, as well as the larger set of community folk who have participated in the workshopping, enactment and filming of a key women's festival tale, in addition to interview and storytelling sessions, the creation of painterly depictions, and coordinating and logistical roles in support of the project. I argue that while some reinforcement of existing power dynamics is inevitable, options exist to mitigate and even enact small victories of reversal in those dynamics that may eventuate in longer-term effects.

Christopher L. Diamond. *A Torrent of Songs: Locana Das' Rāgataranṅiṇī, the Darbhanga Raj, and the Making of the Maithili Tradition.*

By the middle of the twentieth century, the Darbhanga Raj was one of the most prominent ruling families in North India. The intellectual, financial, and political influence of the Khaṇḍavāla dynasty was not a surety from the earliest days of their reign starting with their appointment by the Mughal Emperor Akbar in 1557 CE as caretaking administrators of this productive region of North Bihar. In the politically unstable region of Mithila/Tirhuta, the Khaṇḍavālas were the second clan of Maithil Brahmins to be given suzerainty of the region. Under the previous Oinvāra ruling family of Brahmins (r. 1325-1526 CE), literature, and especially lyric poetry in the vernacular Maithili began to flourish starting with the lyrics of Vidyāpati Ṭhākura (c. 1360-1450 CE), a court poet and scholar attached to their court.

The Khaṇḍavālas commissioned the poet Locana Dās to create a collection of songs documenting and elaborating the Maithili musical tradition to connect themselves in cultural and literary succession to the Oinvāra court. The result, the *Rāgataranṅiṇī* ('The Waves of Melody'), contained documentation and theorisation of the Maithil traditions of lyrics, melody, and rhythm. Between complex and sometimes beguiling explanations of Maithil systems of *rāga* (melody) and *tāla* (rhythm) in Sanskrit and Braj Bhasha, Locana used examples of Maithili lyrical poems (*padas*) as illustrative examples. Vidyāpati's songs have a place of primacy amongst the developing body of Maithili lyric poetry.

Locana's Khaṇḍavāla patrons, at the beginning of their own precarious reign over Mithila, evoked a uniquely Maithili cultural ethos defined by the court of their Oinvāra predecessors. This paper analyses the methods by which Locana defined the Maithili tradition and why it was a useful tool of cultural and literary power consolidation for the early rulers of the Darbhanga Raj.

Hélène Fleury. *Transnational discursive shifts on Mithila paintings: towards a (postcolonial) inclusive feminism?*

“Mithila painting” is an umbrella term for ritual and art forms. During the Bihar drought, AIHB encouraged shifting artwork onto paper to generate income, causing social and aesthetic changes. The resulting globalization coincided with gender and postcolonial studies, deconstructing hegemonic discourses, and male and primitivist canons. The painters/ings narratives undergo a reversal, making visible the overlapping of dominance criteria (gender, caste, class, etc.). Evolution of Mithila art belongs to a connected history involving transnational mediators. Mithila art was a subalternised ritual prior to commodification. In 1917, Maharaja of Darbhanga assigns no primary function to murals, even though the paintings for his daughter’s marriage were sophisticated. They were marginal to male Brahminical values. Guided by upper caste male informants, William Archer documented so called parallels he saw to modern European art. Even if the reception of his 1949 article reifies a vision of Mithila art based on a stylistic distribution per castes and a collective, anonymous women practice, he was less essentialist than he appears. Nevertheless, his wife Mildred is invisibilized in their common work. Primitivist schemes persist in Vequaud, through a countercultural myth. He positions Mithila art at the heart of a timeless village utopia, casting Mithila as a Lost Eden. He presents painters as prophetic figures within a matriarchal countersociety spread by the magazine *EMMA*. A discourse valuing subalternized minorities emerges by Moser-Schmitt, Ray and Naomi Owens promoting a fair trading system. Moser-Schmitt’s contribution on Mithila artists in *Heresies* asserts an inclusive radical feminism. Her committed anthropology contributed to the assertion of Dalit women’s identity. Filming and thinking women’s creativity contribute to thwart inequalities. An inclusive feminism emerges early in India with *Women’s Quest for Power* (1980). The shift from a reified vision to its deconstruction has been gradual. The changing of narratives follows global flux and interareal transfers.

Mithilesh Kumar Jha. *Vidyapati’s Purush Pariksha and its rediscoveries in early twentieth-century.*

Vidyapati Thakur (1350-1448) was a great scholar, diplomat, and poet in the royal court of Raja Shiv Singh of the Oiniwar dynasty (14th – 16th C) in Mithila, North Bihar. He wrote many Sanskrit treatises and historical texts such as Kirti Pataka, Kirtilata, and Likhnavali. He also composed numerous songs/verses in Maithili. They are deeply embedded in the socio-religious and cultural milieu of Mithila. These songs are widespread across the literary spheres of present-day Bengal, Assam, Orissa, and Nepal. They are sung by love-struck souls, laymen, women doing their daily chores, and Lord Shiva and Shakti devotees.

Vidyapati’s literary style has inspired many poets. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) wrote Bhanusinher Padavali imitating Vidyapati. Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950) too was inspired by Vidyapati’s works and translated his numerous verses into English. Vidyapati’s *Purush Pariksha* (The Test of Man) influenced many colonial and native scholars and administrators in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

Vidyapati has become a towering figure in the early twentieth-century literary milieu in North India. Numerous linguistic groups have claimed and counterclaimed, including modern Bengali, Hindi, and Maithili, to appropriate and re-appropriate Vidyapati and his work in their respective literary traditions. This paper mainly focuses on how Vidyapati and his works, particularly *Purush Pariksha*, were received and transmitted across the linguistic spheres

in modern India. To understand the rediscovery of Vidyapati and his texts, this paper examines the numerous biographies and compilations of his works published in Hindi, Maithili, and English since the second half of the 19th Century in Modern India. It attempts to understand this avatar/rediscovers of Vidyapati and his works and how these are distinct from the 'historical' Vidyapati? It also discusses his association with modern Maithili's literary and cultural symbols.

Rani Jha. *Expanding Poetic Voice in Contemporary Madhubani.*

This presentation uses a personal lens to examine shifts and continuities in the exclusive nature of literary/poetry societies in Madhubani.

I delivered my first poetry presentation in Madhubani in 1993. The stage was filled with only male poets and intellectuals. I was the only female poet, perhaps. I was flustered and at first thought that I would not be able to recite my poem in front of all these male poets. The poem, to be honest, was not very good, but I sang it like a song in a beautiful voice. I received a huge round of applause. I was neither interested in knowing nor did I try to find out what people said behind my back. I was satisfied with my presentation and my confidence had more than doubled.

In my poetry, I have always strived to include all reminiscences of the incidents that I have witnessed in the society. However, I could not always do that. I feared that I would be called uncultured for presenting such poems even though I consider myself much braver than other women. A male poet can write about the woe, vices and virtues that females are or have but when a woman tries to speak up her mind, she has to face several negative looks of disapproval.

Today, the scenario has changed in larger cities. There, female poets also get a fair chance to voice their conscience. The male to female ratio is also below one. However, in small cities like Madhubani, the situation is pretty much the same with female poets not getting much opportunity. Their presence has increased on Facebook though. Female poets from lower castes are in an even worse state. It is these shifting trends in literary exchanges that I examine in my presentation.

Makoto Kitada. *Jagatprakāśa Malla's grief to his bosom friend: Affection expressed in Maithili and Newari.*

According to Brinkhaus' study on Maithili dramas written in Nepal, Jagajjyotir Malla, King of Bhaktapur city (reign AD 1614-1637), was the first poet and playwright that introduced Maithili as the court language, instead of Bengali which had until then been in use in the Malla courts of Nepal. Intriguingly, his grandson Jagatprakāśa Malla (reign 1643-1672) was the first author that composed dramas in his mother tongue, Newari (Tibeto-Burmese). Thus, both, grandfather and grandson, played significant roles in the two major lingual reforms in Nepal. However, Jagatprakāśa's impulse of literary creation in his mother tongue seems to be rooted in his personal emotion, namely, his affection and grief to his passed-away bosom friend Candraśekhara, Maithili poet who served his court. In his songs composed in Maithili and Newari, Jagatprakāśa lay bare his strong feeling for the deceased. He often adopts very unique formulations such as: He and his friend are inseparable like the androgyne form of Śiva (ardha-nārīśvara). Indeed, His deep sorrow to the lost friend is the *basso continuo* sounding in the dramatic works of his later years, however merry the plots may be, even in his Newari comedy "Thief Mūladeva and His Partner Śaśideva".

A colophon in the manuscript of the Maithili drama “Abduction of Princess Madālasā” suggests that this play originally composed by Jagajjyotir Malla was restaged by Jagatprakāśa, probably spurred by his unattainable desire to get his friend back to life through the magical power of drama, dance and music.

Thus, my paper will observe this singular phenomenon in the history of literature in the region where the two linguistical areas, NIA and Tibeto-Burmese, overlap: At this point of time and space, an individual's impulse of self-expression and the emergence of the regional identity cross over.

Ufaque Paiker. *Muslim Singes of Maithili Marṣīya in Nineteenth Century Bihar.*

Maithili *marṣīya* (elegy) featured in George Grierson's *Introduction to the Maithili Language and Grammar* as a specimen of Maithili literature. According to him Maithili, *marṣīya* was sung by poor boys of a village. This intermixed genre disrupted his and other colonial linguists' idea of literature and identification of languages with religion and caste nomenclatures.

While “oral literature” and sayings of common people were not considered literature, Maithili was predominantly associated with Maithil Brahmins; *marṣīya* was associated with the Shia Muslim community by colonial linguists and Maithil scholars. Through an analysis of other instances of such aberrations and inconsistencies in Grierson's and other colonial linguists' surveys on the Maithili language, the paper will underline differences and similarities between the colonial monolingual conception of language and the “indigenous” multilingual traditions. The inconsistencies in colonial linguistic surveys will be read to underline sites and networks through which speakers from diverse socio-economic backgrounds interacted and which eventually led to the emergence of genres that were not strictly restricted to caste, class and religious identities or distinguished as language and dialect or as ‘high’ and ‘low’ languages.

Who were these speakers? What were their socio-economic backgrounds? In which language did they speak, sing and write? And if there were any hierarchy amongst these languages are some questions that this paper will address. I will follow these questions through colonial linguistic surveys, collection of songs, *tazkira* (compendia/histories of poetry) grammar, *malḥūzāts* (spoken words) and retrospective recollections of some literary figures of the 19th century Bihar.

Dev Nath Pathak. *A Ghummakad of Modern Mithila: An Interpretative Reading of Nagarjun's Literary and Socio-Political Personhood.*

Baidyanath Mishra (1911-1998) earned popularity and literary fame with his pen names such as *Yatri* and *Nagarjun*. Though fondly and popularly known as *Baba Nagarjun* amongst his admirers, the prefix *yatri*, literally meaning traveller, sums up the life and works, practice and perspectives, of the modern litterateur in twentieth century *Mithila* who wrote prose and poetry in *Hindi*, *Maithili* and *Sanskrit*. Figuratively and literally a *yatri*, *Nagarjun* switched from his identification with *sanatan Hindu dharm* (the Hindu conventions), accepting influences from the *Arya Samaj*, to *Buddhism* in terms of his socio-religious orientation. He never shied away from changing politico-ideological affiliations too. Recognising *Rahul Sankrityayan* (1893-1963) as his significant predecessor, following *gumakkadi* as a

mode of seeing, cognising and understanding, *Nagarjun*, also known as a *jankavi* (people's poet) made valuable contribution to literary public sphere in Hindi and Maithili with his novels, stories, and poems that chronicled the sociocultural subjectivities, lives and historical-material conditions in Mithila and sharpened the questions which hitherto hold political relevance. The life and works of Nagarjun, a modern man with a mendicant's personality, fluid identity, and a wanderer's spirit solicits an interpretative engagement. Arguably, a larger than the literal meaning of the word, 'purush' of *Nagarjun* reveals an alliance with this-world rather than an ambition to arrive at the other-world. Hence, the life and works of *Nagarjun* mirrors his headlong participation in the socio-political movements and awareness of the social-structural anomalies. This paper interpretatively stitches the many identifications of Nagarjun to decipher the meaning of Nagarjun's *ghummakadpan*. The manhood of a *ghumakkad* obtains such utmost flexibility that there is room for creative ambivalence, rather than a rigidity of a unilinear, singular, monochromatic masculinity, deemed 'toxic' in critical feminist discourses.

Pranav Prakash. *The Ethics of Literary Historiography: As Revealed by a Cowherd Playwright's Chapbook.*

On February 2, 1901, the Krishna Press in Bhagalpur published 1000 copies of Bābū Br̥j Bihārī Lāl Maṇḍal's *Mithilā Nāṭak*. This was an ambitious undertaking for a small-town press since Maṇḍal was still to gain renown as a playwright and poet. In the postscript of his play, Maṇḍal identified himself as a "fallen" (*adham*) person hailing from the *majhrauṭ* branch of the "cowherd" caste (*gvālā jāt*) and noted, "I have authored this book diligently so that whoever is stressed out—affected by any kind of human misery—can revive their spirits upon reading this book; they will laugh until their belly hurts." Despite his commitment to alleviating human suffering and his creative engagement with the poetic genres and performative traditions of Mithila, neither Maṇḍal nor *Mithilā Nāṭak* was critiqued by any contemporary scholars of Maithili literature.

Maṇḍal and Krishna Press were active at a time when both Maithili print cultures and the genre of literary history were very much in their infancy. In the subsequent decades, scholars of Maithili literature published a variety of articles, essays and books with the intent of configuring literary historiography—its critical methods, analytical frameworks and historical sources—and consolidating the process of literary canonization. Maṇḍal was ignored by all literary histories, and the Krishna Press died out in unremarkable circumstances.

Why did Maṇḍal and *Mithilā Nāṭak* remain outside the purview of literary historiography? In evaluating the aesthetic attributes, creative insights and cultural significance of canonical works, did literary historians adopt paradigms that could expose the imperfection of works like *Mithilā Nāṭak*? How did Maithili scholars envision the ethics of reading literature and evaluating contributions by diverse peoples? My presentation will reflect on these issues with a view to appraising how ethically regional literary histories may represent their community and cultural past.

Paula Richman. *Mithila [ritual] Painting and Modern Indian Painting: When Does a Handicraft Become Modern?*

A great deal of scholarship by art historians has focused on about 40-50 artists, all but two of whom were men, in urban India who formed the core of the "Modern Indian Painting" movement ca. 1947-1989. In contrast, mostly female Mithila painters who had long created images and designs on walls and floors of their homes and then began to paint on paper in the late 1960s, were viewed as makers of handicrafts. Aside from appreciation from activists

promoting “Mithila identity,” these women painters have rarely received the same analysis, documentation, and exhibitions of “Modern” Indian painters. I examine initial historical, representational, and aesthetics factors that contributed to such incommensurate treatment, as well as key similarities that unite the two forms of painting today.

The history of each form of painting differed significantly beginning with the first published photographs of paintings by Mithila women (1949) and continuing when the newly independent Indian state established its cultural academies that distinguished between handicrafts, which received government assistance for only a decade, and fine art, which has received continued government patronage that continues today. Yet, analysis of paired examples of paintings reveals how each painting tradition shared certain subject matter. Finally, I examine the reasons that led both groups of painters to reject one-point perspective (linked to European Renaissance painting) and reflect on the aesthetic principles chosen in its place.